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Hatchets continued (2)

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- Gear reviews and tests - Edged tools - Axes and hatchets -

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Description :

Hatchets Part Two. Hults and Nordlund hatchets.

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In the first page on hatchets I hope I didn't ramble too much and got across that:

1. It's tough to get a good cheap hatchet because most are too thick and heavy. Even a cheap thin hatchet is better than more expensive but thicker and heavier ones.
2. On separate pages for Gransfors axes, and "baton work", I hope that I made some convincing points in favour of these fine axes and hatchets. You can get what you want if you can pay the price - and they are cheap for what they are.
3. I have great reservations about safety and hatchets. This applies to using heavy hatchets and trying to make a hatchet do when an axe is the appropriate tool.
4. I left things hanging with how to get a light hatchet - or for that matter a very light short axe (or hunter's hatchet). First I had to get something to write about.

Some people though that the $4.95 hatchet page was a joke. It wasn't and the hatchet is slowly being ground down into submission to my weight needs - and it's still chopping along. I've ground it down to a total weight of just under 1 1/2 lbs and the lighter the head gets the better I like it. The page on the baton has a bit about the Gransfors hatchet, but the question still comes up as to what is in between (price wise). As I finally found a $22.00 hatchet that seemed not too bad, and I even got an old Norlund 13oz head. let's take a look at the possibilities....

In most of the outdoor stores I looked in, while in Vancouver, hatchets were not to be seen. That's not too surprising as survival supplies were pretty non-existent too. I did see a hatchet in MEC - and it was one of the Swedish "Black King's. These are seen in logging equipment catalogs, for people cruising in the bush, and in stores here. I want to try one, but so far I haven't seen one that I would buy, since the handles all seem to have horizontal grain. The hatchets at Canadian Tire are too thick to merit consideration as a bush hatchet. On and on it goes. Finally I found a bunch of Hults Bruks hatchets in a local equipment store. I chose the best and so off we go.

The Hults Hatchet

I chose the best and that one had a slightly warped handle: that would seem to be a poor beginning.. Not daunted I tried it out on some driftwood with the factory edge. It was pretty sad in performance, since a sharp but steep secondary grind just doesn't work that well on an axe or hatchet. The hatchet wouldn't cut any sort of paper cleanly, but did feel roughly sharp, and was quite capable of cutting skin. On wood though it was just dismal. That's about what I expected - such hatchets are quickly ground for campers to split kindling and for that task they work. the thick handle was comfortable to use but due to the varnish coating was quite slick, and I was careful with the grip.

As the deficits were apparent right in the store, so were the attributes of the hatchet. The head is reasonable with a fairly thin blade. The handle is vertical grained and very importantly the hatchet has a large hole for the handle. Following along from this, the handle is a lot thicker than the GB hatchet: this makes it more comfortable for use without gloves for people with large hands: if you wear gloves and have small hands, then you may have to thin the handle. Once I test this as a short hatchet I want to affix longer handles to test as a light axe. Once I'd played with the original edge I put on a decent bevel. That didn't take too long with a disc/belt grinder. While there's still lots of polishing of the bevel to do - the hatchet immediately becomes a whole new animal.

This hatchet with a proper bevel will certainly chop well. It has the weight to do so. I still believe that one would be

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further ahead with a Gransfors despite the weight of this hatchet. Even when you make the edges similar in profile, balance of the hatchet comes to play a big part in chopping larger logs. Every cut that lands a little out of place is a cut wasted. It's going to take a while and a few volunteers to check this aspect out. I guess the bottom line is that no matter what we find - you might have to buy your own to see how it works for you. The intent was to do quite a bit of handle modification to see if that had any effect, before removing the original handle - but as you'll see later I got impatient.

Should you consider this hatchet?

1. The hatchet weighs 2lbs without sheath. Either the head is over weight or the handle is some dense wood. In comparison the GB hatchet weighs 1lb 4oz. A 2lb hatchet is a pain to carry. Update: I got stuck in today and so removed the handle to fit the head with a 19" handle. The original handle was 12oz and the head 1 1/4lbs as stamped on it.
2. The steel seems well tempered - but is considerably softer than a GB. It's on a par with many hatchets and axes though.
3. You really do need to put a bunch of work into shaping the bevels, burning the varnish off the handle and giving that an oil finish. This is fun for people like me - but you won't be using this hatchet effectively - as new.
4. The thick handle might well be an attribute for you. The hatchet does handle well for me with a variety of grips along the handle. The handle is fixed into the head with epoxy. It works well - as I found while trying to remove it. There was a bead of hot glue around the handle head junction at the back - it just peeled right off. I'm not sure of its purpose - other than to seal the head. The handle was not wedged but closely fitted and glued. Over time this could pose problems.

The main reasons for choosing this hatchet over the $5 one are the better handle thickness through the head and the harder poll. As with most axes and hatchets, though, if you can't select your own - well, you might be very disappointed with what you get. The main problem I see with this hatchet is that because of its weight it's not likely to be carried close to the person. If you carry a pack then a longer handled hatchet could be carried. The latter would give far more chopping power used two handed and could be used one handed very effectively. I'd imagine that the GB hunter's hatchet or small forest axe would only weigh a few ounces more than this one.

If a person wanted to get started with a hatchet though - this one could be a good choice. The price is very low for the tool you get. Given that the weather around here has been pretty drastic lately, I'd have to say that I'd choose this hatchet over any of the high priced heavy survival knives. I'd be faster to choose something of comparable weight, but with a longer handle though!. So see below.

The long handled Hults

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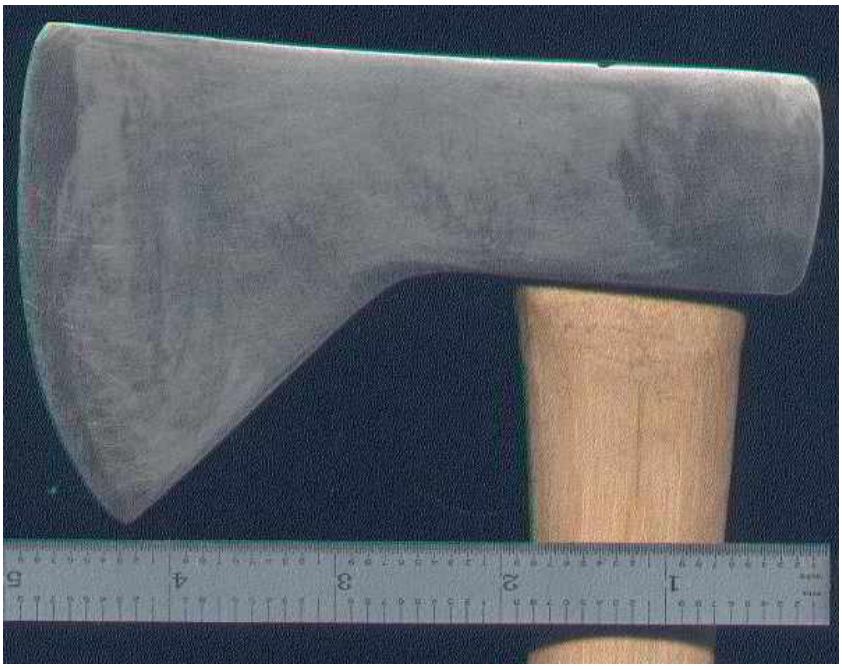
When you get stuck inside for a day and wanted to get moving on a hatchet handle - well you have to get started with what's handy. I guess I'll have to pick up another Hults for more short handle tests....

I took a 19/20" Unex handle and fitted the Hults head on it. It took quite a while since the handle was way over size for the head. The eventual plan is to come up with an axe like one built by Neolyth. Basically this is a ground down head on a long handle: a long handled hatchet of less than a pound. Here it is:



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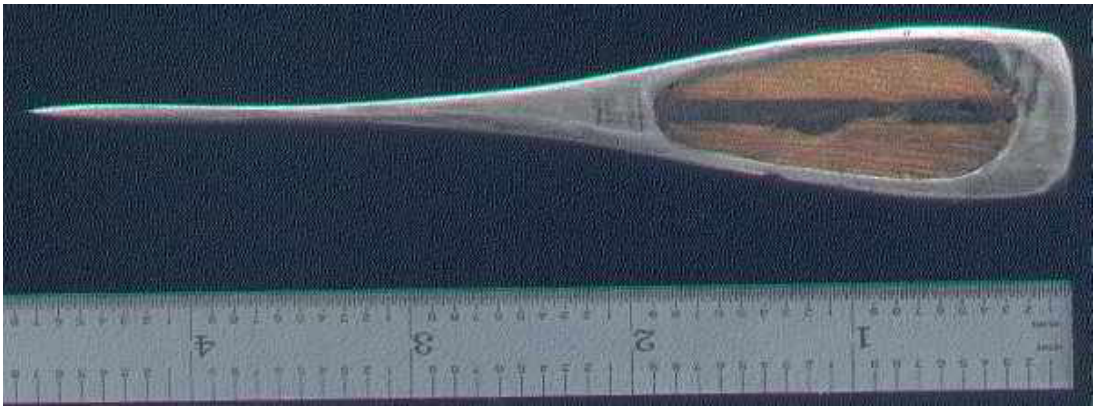

Here's what he had to say about it at Knifeforums:

"Hoodoo, glad you posted that pic of the Gransfors and Norlund compared. my axe started out as the same Norlund but with bashed poll, nicked up edge and painted red, no handle. I'd never heard of them before and the steel seemed good so I went for it. head weight now is between 8 1/2-9 1/2 oz.

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I want to explain a couple things about that image of my axe Jimbo posted. Firstly the idea was to reduce the weight as much as possible without ruining it as a tool. Secondly, I made the face extra long in relation to the poll to give it maximum service life without regrinding the axe, if you take about 3/4" off of the face, that's the proportion of the eventual axe in "later middle age", the extra 3/4" of thin blade is for easy sharpening with a stone. since the temper and steel are good it takes very little sharpening.

The idea was for a modern primitive who didn't quite want to cut himself loose from the gift of modern steel, but couldn't be accessing a grinder when the bevel grew too steep after many sharpenings (presumably after living in the dark woods for 20 years).

The proportions are better with that extra bit of blade missing, but it handles well as is, a little tippy with glancing strikes as when stripping bark, but this is countered by choking up on the handle. the acute angle then slips in and strips well.

Finally, now that it's been seen by so many I kind of wish I'd polished out more of the scratches and given it an old fashioned browning finish. I spend more time being precise and concerning myself with where the cuts fall than with working hard at oversized jobs with it. It cuts deep, so i just focus on not chipping the blade. so far so good, osage is brutally hard wood but not glassy like some conifers, so far so good. all in all, it cuts trees, nips pinkie thick saplings with a flick, cuts apples and cheese, holds an edge well, carries like it's not there and makes a fair ulu: I'm happy with it.

Now that Gransfors 12oz MiniHatchet, that takes it to a whole new level. only a very finely made hatchet would be of much use at that size and length, which btw the Gransfors certainly looks like it's got what it takes.

My ground down Norlund at 14 1/2 oz is mostly used with my grip at around 9-12" depending on the job, the extra length (17") comes in handy for pushing limits, it does a surprising job at cutting larger trees, have cut several 8" osage trees down without too much trouble. the extra length is particularly good limbing these larger saplings as the bushy branches sport pretty nasty thorns.

Most of the minimal trouble i have with my Norlund is due to the forward balance/minimal poll, i have not noticed any trouble with the long handle, most of the time it's a short handle with an extra bit which doesn't seem to get in the way and is still quite packable.

The Gransfors MiniHatchet must be equally light as mine While having perfect balance.

Gransfors MiniHatchet head with 18" handle, aberration or 8th wonder? "

The bad new is that the long handled Hults comes out now at just over two pounds total. With some shaving of the handle and head 1 3/4 lbs total is about the realistic limit if I want to have the axe balance the way I like and have a handle as thick as I like. Basically I'm going to come up with a long handled hatchet a bit lighter than a Gransfors hunter's axe, which has a 1 1/2lb head to start with. And of course I get to play and learn along the way. From holding the hatchet (temporary wedges go in tomorrow and chopping tests begin..) I like it a lot!

Eventually I want to see how light a hatchet can be constructed with a suitable long handle, but let's see where I'm going with all of this. I want a light hatchet to be able to chop green wood for poles and sharpen them. Wood splitting for firewood will consist of splitting dead lower conifer limbs so no real wedging action is required. What is required is that the hatchet has enough efficiency to split through the limbs and embed in a log so that the limbs can be split

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against the resistance of the hatchet. What I created today is just another light axe - though it should come in lighter than even the GB hunter's hatchet. If I'm correct in my assumptions then I should find it cuts better than any one-handed hatchet, will still split large wood, and will out perform even the GB wildlife hatchet - at a cost of another 8oz.

The downside is that it's hard to fit a long handle on a hatchet - most having smaller handle holes through the head. Looking at my cheap hatchet and a junker - they'd just be too dangerous if used with a longer handle. The Hults is the only hatchet head I've seen with a handle hole large enough to make what I've just described.

So how did I make out with lots of cutting?

The bottom line is good. I've done lots of chopping and this short axe or long hatchet - will easily outperform the GB hatchet - and by a very wide margin! If the GB Small Forest Axe beats this one then it'll be very good indeed. One is on its way right now so I shouldn't be long in finding out! Naturally as soon as you get decent bevels and have more weight - a 32oz hatchet should outperform a 20oz hatchet by 50% just on weight alone. I feel though that the longer handle contributes much to accuracy - especially as you get tired.

The downside is the amount of work necessary on the face and bevels to get the Hults to work in a decent fashion. I couldn't have accomplished this in any sort of reasonable time with hand tools. So you either have a belt grinder of some kind or you give up. The face wasn't dished quite enough to allow the hatchet to work properly since the face was slightly bent. It was almost like making a hatchet from scratch.

The Norlund Hatchet

I always do a search for hatchets and axes on ebay Canada - just to see if something interesting comes up. And a little while back there was an auction on a Norlund. It was advertised as a tomahawk, but they were actually sold new as hatchets. I always regretted not getting one out of the SIR catalogue while they carried them. It's the Hudson Bay style head - but hatchet sized. It was something to get home with the head - drive out a piece of old handle and weigh the sucker. Now that lots of rust has been ground off with the belt grinder it's a little over 12oz. There's lots of polishing to do with this little tool, but for now It's in shape to fit a handle and try. Later I'll fix it properly, because I'll probably want to trim it down another ounce. We'll see. This is actually a nice little hatchet, the weight being right and the temper being the best I've seen so far other than Gransfors. It has the usual problem with narrow head design, but that's the nature of this design of head.

This is the same head as shown on Hoodoo's picture and what Neolyth ground down. It's a tiny head compared to what most people think of when they see a "Hudson Bay" style head. That one is 1 3/4lb (28oz) - more than double the weight of this 12oz wonder.

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This is the one that is going to be gradually ground down for a belt hatchet - but first I'll be wanting to try it as is, to see just how it works. You'll notice that the profile is fairly thick and the cheeks are thick too around the handle hole. This one as is, could sure be used for baton work to split larger stuff.

More information as I use it a lot more, together with the GB Wildlife hatchet for comparison. For now it looks like a decent hatchet despite a much thicker face than the GB.

More at Hatchets continued (3)

Post-scriptum :Original article at OldJimbo's site.

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